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ABSTRACT

In response to the 1978 amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, many states have developed curriculum and assessment procedures for listening skills. A review of several states' listening objectives, however, indicates a lack of any universally accepted definition of listening. One model of communication that divides a person's communicative ability into information acquisition, processing, generation, and dissemination also suggests that listening is a complicated set of intersecting and overlapping skills. Although separation of skills is difficult, it is necessary for instructional and testing purposes. Educators interested in developing effective procedures for listening assessment must realize that no one test is going to evaluate all listening skills and that instructional objectives must be congruent with test coverage if the testing process is to have any validity. (MM)

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PROBLEMS IN ASSESSING LISTENING SKILLS

ABSTRACT

In 1978, the Elementary and Secondary School Act was amended to include speaking and listening. Many states have developed curriculum and assessment procedures for listening skills, but problems remain. This paper reviews some of the listening definitions and objectives developed by selected states, describes definitional inconsistancies, and discusses the assessment problems these inconsistancies create. The paper also make recommendations for the development of listening testing procedures.

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PROBLEMS IN ASSESSING LISTENING SKILLS

Philip M. Backlund

Over the past few years, I've been involved in efforts to encourage educators at the elementary and secondary level to include more material on speaking and listening in their curriculum. Based on a local newspaper article about some of those efforts, I was recently asked by a local high school principal to speak to his faculty on improving listening skills. Being a little cautious about such requests, I asked if I could meet with the principal and some teachers so that I could figure out what they meant by "improving listening skills." There were six people at the meeting and six ideas on what I should talk about. Ideas included information on listening exercises, the place of listening in the curriculum, "how to get students to listen to us", and (from the principal) how to get the faculty to listen to each other. A lot of the concerns expressed at that meeting really didn't relate to listening. They related to accountability, to communication climate, to respect, to classroom management, and quite a few other things. I think what happened in that meeting is symptomatic of one of the major problems with listening - no one agrees on what it is.

However, lack of consensus on definition hasn't stopped people from working on listening skill development. That's a good thing. But it does present a lot of problems for assessment.

The purpose of this paper is to look at the progress and problems related to the assessment of listening skills. The paper will cover a brief history of the movement to assess listening in educational settings, a description of common listening skills, current types of listening assessment efforts, and suggestions for further refinement in assessment technique.

History

Instructional efforts in listening have been with us for a long time, but it wasn't until 1978 that listening skill assessment began to receive strong attention in the educational community. In 1978 the Federal government, through an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary School Act, included oral communication in its definition of basic skills. As Alice Ridge (1983) stated, few people outside of SCA have thought of listening as a separate skill, both teachable and measurable. State departments of education, legislatures, school districts, and local schools were faced with implementing this mandate with little knowledge of how to go about it. But many tried. A recent survey (Backlund, et al., 1982) showed that 19 states had developed or were in the process of developing curriculum or assessment programs in listening. But a look at these efforts show a wide diversity of skills and curriculum ideas.

There has been little coordination between states and other educational entities on listening definition. Until this happens, we cannot expect to have a single, comprehensive test for listening skill. Assessment procedures flow from educational definitions and objectives - not the other way around. Some examples of

listening definitions as developed in various states may help illustrate some of the difficulties test developers face.

Listening Objectives

Following are selected listening objectives as published by various states that have instituted curriculum and/or assessment programs in listening. The list is not exhaustive, but does represent a cross section of the published skills.

Georgia - Listening Skills

The learner will

1. expand the number of words understood when heard in context.
   a. learn multiple and specific meanings of words, their denotations and connotations.
   b. understand figurative language, idiomatic expressions, colloquial terms and allusions.
   c. learn specialized vocabularies.
2. adjust listening strategies according to
   a. the purpose (distinguish message from noise, concentrate, suspend judgment, avoid distraction, wait for turn to talk, avoid interrupting, display interest and involvement).
   b. the nature of the material (topic, density and concept difficulty)
   c. the organizational cues of the speaker (statement of points, organizational phrases, repetition).
3. listen and respond for a variety of purposes
   a. pleasure and enjoyment
   b. to follow directions
   c. to make intelligent consumer judgments
   d. to function as an informed citizen, e.g., news broadcasts, editorials, speeches, political appeals.
   e. to obtain information.
   f. to apply information heard to new situations.
4. recognize and discriminate among common sounds and sound signals in his or her environment.
5. demonstrate understanding of a basic vocabulary related to his or her environment.
6. recognize and recall the following when specifically stated by the speaker
   a. main idea(s)
   b. details
   c. sequence
   d. cause-effect

7. infer the following when not specifically stated by the speaker.
   a. main idea(s)
   b. details
   c. sequence
8. receive and comprehend varied materials at different levels of thinking, e.g., literal, inferential, evaluative and appreciative.
9. receive and evaluate material critically by making judgments about validity, bias, speaker qualifications, facts and opinion, fantasy or realism.
10. recognize and identify the qualities of a speaker's style, imagery, word choice and technique.
11. accept and understand other dialects as valid communication.

Maine - Listening Skills

1. Recognition and Discrimination
   a. Discriminate between environmental sounds.
   b. Discriminate between speech sounds.
   c. Demonstrate attentiveness and courtesy in listening situation.
   d. Demonstrate effective listening skills (e.g., attentiveness, courtesy)
   e. Recognize the effects of intonation, pitch, and juncture on meaning.
   f. Apply effective listening skills (attentiveness, courtesy).
   g. Recognize the meaning of gestures and other nonverbal communication.
2. Comprehension
   a. Follow orally presented directions.
   b. Identify the sequence of events in an orally presented selection.
   c. Identify the topic of an orally presented selection.
   d. Retell a story that is presented orally.
   e. Identify the topic sentence and supporting details of an orally presented selection.
   f. Identify the point of view of the speaker of an orally presented selection.
   g. Identify facts and supporting details of an orally presented selection.
   h. Identify the setting, the characters, or the sequence of events in an orally presented selection.
   i. Identify the tone, mood, and persuasive techniques used in an orally presented selection.
3. Interpretation
   a. Predict the outcome of an orally presented selection (e.g., an incomplete story).
   b. Interpret the emotional tone of an orally presented selection

3. c. Interpret gestures and other nonverbal communication.
   d. Identify the purpose of an oral communication.
   e. Identify implied main ideas in an orally presented selection.
   f. Write a summary of orally presented material.
   g. Differentiate between the stated and implied main ideas in an orally presented selection.
   h. Analyze cause and effect relationships in an orally presented selection.

4. Evaluation
   a. Distinguish between fact and fiction in an orally presented selection.
   b. Given an orally presented selection, distinguish among fact, fiction, opinion, assumption, and inference.
   c. Identify source/message bias.
   d. Analyze a speaker's purpose for a given selection.
   e. Evaluate the validity of oral reasoning.
   f. Recognize the influence of cultural, social, educational and environmental factors on speech.

Massachusetts - Listening

1. Basic Listening Skills
   a. Recognize words and phrases used by the speaker.
   b. Indicate why the speaker can or cannot be understood.

2. Understanding What You Hear
   a. Understand spoken words and ideas
   b. Identify and understand main ideas
   c. Associate important details with main ideas
   d. Understand descriptions of events and experiences
   e. Understand speaker's purpose

3. Using What You Hear
   a. Understand and respond to survival words used in emergency situations
   b. Summarize information and draw conclusions
   c. Recognize when words and phrases are used to convince or persuade
   d. Follow straightforward directions

Michigan - Critical Listening

1. Identify the main idea of an oral presentation of appropriate length.
2. Identify the most appropriate summary of a selection presented orally.
3. Identify the purpose of an oral presentation.
4. Recall information presented orally.
5. Identify cause and effect relationships within an oral presentation.

6. Identify appropriate inferences about either the presenter herself/himself or persons described by the presenter.
7. Identify differences between fact and opinion in an oral presentation.
8. Identify/describe the main story line or sequence of events of a story or event presented orally.

North Carolina - Listening

Competency Goal(s)

1. The learner will be able to hear differences between and among sounds.
2. The learner will be able to listen literally for items of information, sequence, main ideas, comparisons/contrasts, and cause-effect relationships.
3. The learner will be able to listen interpretively in order to predict outcomes, classify, summarize, and consolidate.
4. The learner will be able to listen interpretively in order to infer main ideas, supporting details, comparisons/contrasts, cause-effect relationships, and meaning from figurative language.
5. The learner will be able to listen critically for fact, fiction, opinion, bias, propaganda, assumption, inference, and relevance.
6. The learner will be able to listen critically in order to draw conclusions and make judgments about content and performance.
7. The learner will be able to listen creatively in order to construct sensory images and to talk about emotional responses.
8. The learner will be able to listen creatively in order to develop solutions to problems and to formulate new ideas.

Performance Indicators

"The first number for performance indicator corresponds with the skill number above."

Grades K-3

1.01 With eyes closed, identify a number of sounds from nature (e.g., animals) and man-created objects (e.g., bells, whistles)

1.03 After hearing a list of words, identify the consonant sound at the beginning of each word.

1.07 Identify the long and short vowels and simple vowel combinations (ow, ar, aw) in appropriate words.

2.01 Given three simple oral directions, perform the task in sequence.

3.01 After hearing the first half of a story, predict the outcome.

4.05 After hearing an effect, infer a cause

5.01 After watching and listening to a film or TV cartoon, or after hearing a story, identify those elements that could have been real and those that are clearly make-believe.

6.01 After listening to a story, discuss decisions made by a character with emphasis upon evaluating the quality of the decision.

7.01 While listening to a given selection of music, respond through body movement in a manner to reflect the mood, rhythm, etc.

8.01 Propose solutions to classroom or school-related problems presented by the teacher or classmates.

Grades 7-9

1.01 Given an audio-taped list of 25 sentences in which endings (e.g., -ed, s, 's, -ing) are omitted or slurred, identify these unconventional pronunciations and pronounce them in the conventional way.

2.01 After listening to a weather report, accurately repeat general information about conditions in the forecast.

3.01 After listening to a sound-filmstrip of an open-ended story, complete the story orally and state reasons why a conclusion is logical.

4.01 After listening to a reading of a letter to the editor of a newspaper, write the purpose of the letter and the reasons that support that purpose.

5.03 After listening to an argument for or against a school rule, identify orally the bias of the speaker.

Texas - Listening

Program Goals -

1. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in attending to a speaker.
2. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in following oral directions.
3. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in analyzing an oral presentation.
4. The program provides opportunities for students to develop skills in responding to oral presentations.

Utah

Basic Competencies in Listening

1. Given oral directions to do a task involving at least three steps, the student will listen to the directions once and follow them with 100% accuracy.
2. Given a listening situation in which the student hears a story, he/she will retell the significant events sequentially, either orally or in written form.
3. Given a clear, concise oral presentation containing several important facts, the student will summarize orally or in written form the essential details of the presentation.

Life Competency Areas - Listening

1. Listens and responds appropriately to commercials, instructions, and other oral communication necessary as a consumer of goods and services.
2. Listens and responds appropriately to questions and other oral communications related to career.
3. Listens and responds appropriately to doctor's instructions, safety warnings, and other oral communications related to health and safety.
4. Listens and responds appropriately to statements by elected officials, participants in a discussion and other citizenship related oral communication.

Performance Indicators

1. Given a taped presentation of the closing of an automovile sale the student will be able to identify at least three possible costs in addition to the original purchase price and explain what each cost is and what it would do for him.
2. After listening to a taped presentation comparing the features of several different stereos, the student will indicate the stereo unit of his preference and list three reasons why.

This sample of listening objectives clearly shows one thing: a universally accepted definition of listening does not exist. In fact, there are (in some states) more listening skills identified then speaking skills. It appears that we must accept the idea that listening is a complex multidimensional set of skills. If that is true, it follows that we will not be able to discover or develop a single test of listening. A test is designed to flow from educational objectives. If we have this many listening objectives, we cannot reasonably expect one test to cover them all.

So, where does that leave us? It means that we may need to turn our efforts to the development of a way of classifying the types of listening skills, then developing a series of assessment procedures that tap the skills in these categories. In some

cases we may not be testing what some people call "listening." We may move to viewing listening as a generic term that covers a wide range of behaviors. We already use the term "speaking" in this way and we don't have (nor are we trying) to develop a single test of "speaking ability." The next section of the paper develops an idea for classifying the various listening skills.

Classifying Listening Skills

If we move away from the idea of trying to assess listening skill in a global fashion, what do we move to? A number of years ago, Lee Thayer (1968) had an interesting model of communication that I think can be applied here. He said that a person's communicative ability could be divided into four parts: information acquisition, information processing, information generation, and information dissemination. These four parts are very similar to a classification system developed by Steil ( ). His four were: competencies of a sensing nature, competencies of an interpreting nature, competencies of an evaluative nature, and competencies of a responding nature. While perhaps not being ideal, lets consider each of the four steps suggested by Thayer in light of the skills commonly associated with listening.

Thayer's first category was information acquisition. He divided this into two sub-categories; a person's ability to acquire information and a person's susceptability to acquire information. Under a person's ability to acquire information, we could include a number of skills that could be taught and assessed:

1. language comprehension (vocabulary)
2. the ability to accurately interpret non-verbal cues
3. auditory discrimination
4. the ability to accurately interpret the internal state of the other person
5. the degree to which the person is familiar with the situation in question.

In regards to a person's susceptability to acquire information, there are a number of factors that can be considered. While these are not directly skills, they can be taught and, in some cases, assessed.

1. A major factor is the degree of information need a person has regarding the subject. A person will attend much more closely to something they have a need to learn about.
2. The degree to which a person has an open mind regarding the subject. It's opposite (dogmatism) has been assessed through an instrument developed by Rockeach.
3. The level of apprehension present for the listener.

This is the first of these four steps - a person's ability and susceptability to acquire information. This can be divided into teachable and assessable skills. Let us turn to the second category.

The second of the steps discussed by Thayer is information processing. While difficult to assess directly, there are a number of dimensions of a person's ability to process information that clearly apply to listening and to an overall communicative ability. These include:

1. short and long term memory
2. the ability to sort and organize information
3. the ability to see relationships between bits of information

4. the ability to correctly sequence information
5. the ability to discern the main point and supporting material
6. the ability to evaluate the validity of the support used in a persuasive message
7. the ability to assess the credibility of the speaker.

These can be called cognitive or thinking skills. But they do relate to the person's ability to process information acquired. Many of these (if not all) skills have been identified in various places as listening skills.

The third category offered by Thayer is called information generation. In this part of the process, the person is putting the information acquired and processed together with his/her own needs, values, etc. and moves to the next step of formulating a response. This category is easily the most difficult category to define and assess.

The fourth category is information disseminating. This is essentially the listener's ability to respond to the speaker. The major problem here is separating the response to a message from a new message generated by the listener. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the two. Nonetheless, skills identified in this cateogry that have been called listening skills include

1. giving appropriate feedback
2. withholding a response until the message ends
3. withholding preparation of a response until speaker is finished
4. responding in a "congruent" fashion
5. asking questions based on the speaker's message.

Are these listening skills or speaking skills? This fourth category brings us back to, and perhaps into, speaking skills.

These four categories, while perhaps not ideal, do show us that listening is a complicated set of skills that intersect and overlap. Separation is difficult, but for instructional and for testing purposes, it is possible.

Implications for Assessment

So what does this mean for the assessment of listening? I think there are a number of important implications.

1. If you are looking for a single, comprehensive test of listening skills, you are not likely to find it. Attempts to develop one are probably going to be incomplete. Alternatives need to be sought.
2. Does this imply that currently available listening tests are invalid? No, we must know exactly what objectives the test covers and what objectives it doesn't cover. For example, the Brown-Carlsen Test of Listening Comprehension may measure recall ability rather than listening ability (Petrie, 1904). Also, the Jones-Mohr Listening Test appears to be a test more of empathy and social insight than listening (Larsen, et. al., 1978). The point here is that these tests do cover aspects of listening but not all dimensions of listening.
3. If you do select a commercially available listening test, the most important part of the test selection process is the match of the instructional objectives to the test coverage. These must be congruent for the testing process to have any validity.

4. If you are constructing your own listening test, the same point applies here. Design the test to insure a close match between the test items and the testing objectives. You must be sure of what you mean when you say "listening".

Summary

The ability to listen is clearly a significant factor in a person's overall communication competence. Yet theorists and researcher's haven't come close to agreeing on a definition of listening. They are not likely to reach that agreement soon.

But that fact shouldn't deter the teacher or assessment specialists at any level of education from using or developing listening testing procedures. As long as the definition of listening used is clear and defensible, and the testing procedure matches that definition, that is what matters. That is what we should work toward.

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